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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to locate and analyze unpublished studies on student withdrawal from Canadian universities in order to determine how many studies had been completed, what research methods were used, and what results and conclusions were reached. Letters were sent to the presidents of 51 Canadian universities requesting copies of any recent studies of the subject; responses were received from 49, showing that 12 universities had conducted research prior to 1973-74, 11 universities were conducting or preparing to conduct research, and 20 universities have never conducted research on student withdrawal. The studies were classified into four general headings: statistical, causal, multivariate, and personality studies. Among findings was that student withdrawal is on the increase. Studies examined when students withdraw; student withdrawal by program; why students withdraw; and variables such as sex, grade point average, and socioeconomic background. Problems with each of the four study methodologies are noted and recommendations, such as the need for a uniform research approach, are made. (PHR)

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Student Withdrawals from Canadian Universities: A Study of Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Student withdrawal, temporarily dormant as an issue during the expansionary period in education of the nineteen sixties and early seventies, is once again emerging as a subject of concern. While no centralized data exists as to the precise magnitude of this problem in the Canadian context, the evidence presented by local studies, as well as the increased attention directed towards this subject by administrators across the country, suggest that the problems related to student withdrawal are neither ephemeral nor unimportant.

As Calder, McKay and Neilson have observed in their study conducted at Wilfrid Laurier University,[1] there are three basic reasons why the subject of student withdrawal is a current focus of administrative concern. First, the "dropout" is perceived by both future students and the general public to be a reflection of the university's inability to meet student needs, particularly career needs. While it is true that the university does not perceive vocational training as one of its primary functions, it is equally true that both those who finance the university and those who consider attending it, are increasingly evaluating the university in terms of its ability to produce marketable manpower.

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[1] W. Berry Calder, Brian McKay & Robert Nelson, Student Withdrawal: A Developmental Perspective (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1977), pp. 3-4.

Secondly, the student dropout creates administrative inefficiency. The dropout represents an unrecouped loss in relation to the costs of admission, planning, and running programs.

Thirdly, in real financial terms, the dropout represents lost income in the form of refunded tuition, and in areas where government financing is directly related to enrolment, in the form of foregone government grants. This consideration is particularly important in relation to the current trend of declining university enrolment, a trend which is predicted to continue until the turn of the century.

The subject of student withdrawal must be considered equally important when viewed from the perspective of the faculty. As R. E. Iffert[1] has observed, a high dropout rate must invariably have an effect upon faculty morale, particularly with respect to teaching introductory first year courses. Further, there might be a circular effect here, with first year students being affected by faculty members who have become disenchanted with the high proportion of student withdrawals.

But if the subject of student withdrawal is important from the administrative and faculty perspective, it is even more important when viewed from the perspective of the student. While the process of withdrawal may, on occasion, constitute a positive action by the student (e.g., a realization of alternate channels for personal development), it might often represent a negative experience.

To the student, undergoing the process of withdrawal can be a very painful experience. At the very least, it represents lost money

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[1]R. E. Iffert, "Institutional implications--facilities, faculties, students," paper presented at the Princeton University Conference, October 8, 1964.

and lost time. In the extreme, it may involve frustrated ambitions, unfulfilled goals, and peer-group rejection. As Cope and Hannah observed in their study of the American dropout, the process of withdrawal may be marked by self-doubt, disappointment and depression.[1]

Moreover, the subject of student withdrawal is not simply an issue of concern to those students undergoing the process of withdrawal. Many of the factors contributing to student withdrawal (dissatisfaction with academic programming, dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching, lack of financing, lack of confidence in the university's ability to satisfy career goals) are felt by many of those who continue to remain in the university system, as well as by those who choose to withdraw. These factors are considered by some to be direct reflections of an institution's weakness in areas such as clarity and fulfillment of purpose, academic programming and teaching, and the university system's weakness in areas such as student financing, utilization of resources--both human and otherwise--and student admission practices.

Thus any effort to eradicate or reduce the causes of student withdrawal may, in the long run lead to maximized administrative efficiency, increased university finances, increased teacher morale and better teaching, and greater student and societal satisfaction with the university. In short, efforts in this direction may assist a university in being more responsive to the needs of those who attend it, those who finance it, and those who work in it. It is for these reasons that the subject of student withdrawal merits serious attention.

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[1]Robert Cope and William Hannah, Revolving College Doors, The Causes and Consequences of Dropping Out, Stopping Out, and Transferring. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), p. 46.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Student withdrawal has been and continues to be the subject of much effort and investigation on the part of American researchers, and American publications on the topic abound.[1]

Yet both the contradictory nature of American data, as well as the uniqueness of Canadian universities as institutions and as parts of a system (or non-system), suggest that it would be unwise to reach conclusions on student withdrawal at Canadian institutions based exclusively, or for the large part, on extrapolations from American research.

Unfortunately, a literature search conducted prior to the undertaking of this project, revealed few publications exploring the subject of student withdrawal in the Canadian context.[2] Moreover, it is not

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[1]For an overview of the work done by American researchers on the subject of student withdrawal, see any of the following:

Marsh, L. M. "College Drop-Outs--A Review." Personnel and Guidance Journal, XLIV (1966), pp. 465-476.

Summerskill, J. "Drop-Outs from Colelge," in Sanford, N. The American College, New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc. (1962), pp. 627-657.

Tinto, V. "Drop-Out from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." Review of Educational Research, XLV (1975), pp. 89-125.

[2]Of those studies that were revealed, one worth noting, is a study conducted by Yvon Ferland of Statistics Canada, the results of which may be found in two reports, Service Bulletin, Education Division, Vol. 1, No. 6, (Catalogue 81-001), and "Student Withdrawals from Canadian Universities", January 30, 1973. This study examined two groups of student "dropouts". The first, consisted of students who in 1971 applied to one or more universities for the first time, were accepted by at least one of the universities, but failed to register in September, 1971. The second, was composed of students who completed the 1970-71 academic year successfully, but who did

readily discernible whether this situation reflects the absence of data on student withdrawal, or simply the reluctance of institutional researchers to publish the results of research on this subject.

Thus, the purpose of this study became to locate and analyze unpublished withdrawal studies in order to discover:

1. How many studies have been completed?
2. What research methods were used?
3. What results were obtained?
4. What are the implications for
   a) further reserach?
   b) institutional change?

Methodology of This Pilot Study

In December, 1977, a letter was sent to the presidents of 51 Canadian universities outlining the purpose of this study and requesting that they cooperate by forwarding copies of any recent studies conducted at their institutions on the subject of student withdrawal. If no studies were completed, they were requested to advise on whether any were in progress

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not return in September, 1971, and was subdivided into undergraduate students and graduate students. A sampling of each group was surveyed in order to analyze some of their characteristics, their reasons given for withdrawing, their present occupations, and their plans with respect to future university studies.

Among other things, Ferland observed the following:
- proportionately, far more women withdrew than men
- married students were far more likely to withdraw than unmarried students
- students whose parents had only a secondary education or less had a very slightly higher tendency to withdraw than did students whose parents had completed higher levels of education
- the most frequently given reason for withdrawing was "lack of money" followed by "dissatisfaction with university life" and "dissatisfaction with job opportunities for graduates"
- the largest number of students surveyed stated that they were not planning on returning to university, although this number was exceeded by the cumulative total of those planning to return and those who were undecided

or contemplated for the near future, and if none were completed, in progress, or contemplated, to advise accordingly.

In April, 1978, a follow-up letter was sent to those presidents not responding to the initial mailing.

In an effort to secure maximum cooperation, it was agreed that the confidentiality of individual institutions would be protected.

Results

Following the first mailing, 42 responses were received, and a further 7 responses were received subsequent to the second mailing. The responses indicate that the following research has been done:

12[a] universities have conducted student withdrawal studies from 1973-74 to the present.

6[b] universities have conducted student withdrawal studies in the years prior to 1973-74.

11 universities are presently engaged in conducting student withdrawal studies, or are preparing to conduct such studies in the near future.

20 universities have never conducted and are not presently conducting a student withdrawal study.

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[a] One of the institutions in this category had actually conducted three studies.

[b] Two of the institutions in this category had actually conducted two studies each.

ANALYSIS OF METHODOLOGY

While all of the studies received are essentially distinct in character, they may be generally characterized under four headings:

Statistical Studies: Studies which approach the student withdrawal phenomenon from the perspective of numbers; that is, the number of students who drop out, the percentage of students who drop out, projections of student dropouts.

Causal Studies: Studies which concern themselves totally, or in part, with determining why students drop out.

Multivariate[1] Studies: Studies which examine the relationship between student withdrawal and assorted variables; that is, age, sex, high school averages, educational level of parents, etc.

Personality Studies: Studies which analyze certain personality characteristics of withdrawing students, thereby attempting to put together a portrait of what might be described as the "withdrawal personality".

Two points of clarification are required here. First, there is an element of overlap that is not entirely accounted for in the above categories. For example, many of the multivariate studies also contain personality or causal components, many of the causal studies contain statistical components, etc. Secondly, only four institutions forwarded studies which may be categorized as statistical. It is not clear whether only

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[1]The term "multivariate" is used advisedly. It refers to studies which examine the interrelationships among many variables; many of these studies, in fact, do not employ multivariate statistical techniques while some of the personality studies do.

four institutions have approached the student withdrawal phenomenon from a purely statistical perspective, or whether other institutions keep statistics on student withdrawal, but do not consider them to be "studies" and therefore did not forward them.

Statistical Studies

As might be expected, the simplest methodology was adopted by the statistical studies. All four of the statistical studies were based on studies of enrolment. No contact, direct or indirect, was made with withdrawing students. Study A was a study of percentage reductions in full and part-time students from 1974-75 through 1977-78, conducted on a university-wide basis. Study B was a study of full-time "student retention rates" from 1968-69 through 1977-78 in three faculties, Arts and Science, Engineering, and Business. Study C was a faculty-by-faculty study of full-time student attrition rates from 1967-68 through 1971-72. Study D was a program by program analysis of full and part-time student attrition between the Fall of 1972 and the Winter of 1973.

Causal Studies

The methodology adopted by the eight causal studies was somewhat more varied and complex. Four of the studies were based on written contact with students who had previously withdrawn. One of the studies was based, in part, on written contact with out-of-town students who had withdrawn and, in part, on telephone contact with local students who had withdrawn. One of the studies was based on an analysis of reasons given for withdrawal on a form completed by students at the time of withdrawal.

One of the studies was based partially on forms filled out by students at the time of withdrawal, and partially on information derived from student records. It is unclear as to the exact methodology used in the eighth study. In four of the five studies based in whole or in part on written contact, students who had withdrawn were sent a questionnaire which they were asked to complete and return; in the fifth study students were simply sent a letter and asked to write stating their reason for withdrawal.

Study E was a university-wide study of reasons given for withdrawal by full and part-time students withdrawing in the Fall term of 1972. The study also embraced a statistical analysis of withdrawing students by division, program, and year. The study was based on an analysis of a partial sampling (65 out of 325) of the forms filled out by students at the time of withdrawal. Study F was an analysis of reasons given for withdrawal by all university undergraduates (it is unclear as to whether both full and part-time students are included in this classification), post-graduates and special students who withdrew during the 1976-77 academic year. The study also embraced a numerical analysis of student withdrawal by year and by program from 1973-74 through 1976-77. The first part of the study was based on responses to a letter sent to 130 withdrawing students requesting that they write back stating their reason for withdrawal; the second part was based on student records. Study G was not, strictly speaking, a withdrawal study, but rather was a study of "no shows"--students who were admitted to the 1976-77 term but who chose not to register. This study was based on

a questionnaire sent to 650 out of the 700 "no shows" (questionnaires were not sent to "no shows" who were from outside North America). It is not clear whether the "no shows" had been accepted into full and part-time study, or just full-time study. Study H was a study of reasons given for withdrawal by students who were academically eligible to return to the university for the 1971-72 academic year, but who did not. Students who registered in September 1971 but dropped out during the first part of the academic year were also included. The study was broken into two parts: out-of-town students, and local students. A questionnaire was sent to 115 out-of-town students who were eligible to return but did not do so, and to 25 out-of-town students who registered in September but dropped out during the first part of the academic year. Telephone calls were made to 319 local students who fit into the former category and 90 local students who fit into the latter. It is unclear whether the study is a study of full and part-time students, or simply full-time students. Study I was a study of reasons given for withdrawal by full-time students who were eligible to return in 1976-77 but who did not do so. The study was based on a questionnaire sent to 618 students who were given a list of potential reasons for withdrawal, and asked to check as many as they desired. Study J while ostensibly designed to examine withdrawal at the institution concerned, turned out, in point of fact to be much more of a study of the inadequacy of that university's information retrieval system than a study of student withdrawal. To the extent that it was a withdrawal study, it was a study of

withdrawals from the full-time student population between 1970-71 and 1972 based on student records and forms filled out by students at the time of withdrawal. Withdrawing students were divided into two categories: "withdrawals", that is, students who withdrew in the middle of an academic session, and "non-returners" , that is, students who completed full academic sessions but who chose not to return to complete sufficient sessions to obtain a degree. Study L was conducted at one campus of a multi-campus university and was a study of reasons given for not returning by full and part-time students who did not return for the 1977-78 academic session. While primarily a causal study, the study also examined the present activities and future plans of non-returning students. The study was based on an analysis of questionnaires sent to 1028 students, of which 358 replies (239 by full-time students and 119 by part-time students) were usable.

Multivariate Studies

Seven multivariate studies were received, of which five might be termed "major" multivariate studies and two "minor" multivariate studies. The five major multivariate studies, in addition to examining the direct question of why students withdrew, examined a wide range of variables as they related to student withdrawal. Study M was a study of withdrawal by full-time students from September 1975 through March 1976 based on student records and on a questionnaire sent to 554 students of which 194 were classified as "usable returns". Variables considered included age, sex, educational level of parents, financial support while at university, and attitudinal characterisitics of withdrawing students. Study N was a study of students who were eligible to return to the Faculty of Arts in

1972-73 but who chose not to do so. It is unclear whether the students studied were full and part-time students, or simply full-time students. The study was based on a questionnaire sent to 680 "non-returners" (of which 220 were returned) and considered variables such as attitude toward university, grade-average of students prior to leaving, age, sex, religion, and economic strata of withdrawing students. Study O was a study of full-time students who withdrew between February 1970 and March 1971 based on exit interviews conducted at the time of withdrawal in the office of student affairs. Student interviews were not a compulsory part of the withdrawal process, and while it is known that 563 students took part in interviews, it is unclear as to the exact percentage of the total withdrawal population that this figure constituted. Those participating in the study were subjected to a 15-40 minute interview based on a qestionnaire developed by the Dean of Student Affairs and university psychiatrists. A wide variety of variables were considered in relation to student withdrawal as were the interrelationships among variables. Study P was a study of full-time undergraduate students who were enrolled in April, 1977 and who were eligible to re-enrol in September 1977 but who did not re-enrol. The study was based on student records and on a questionnaire (followed by three reminder notices) sent to 1056 students of which 676 were returned. A wide variety of variables were studied in relation to student attrition as were the interrelationships among variables. Study Q was conducted at one campus of a multi-campus university and was a study of full-time students who were eligible to return to the campus in September 1977 but who failed to do so. Variables considered in relation to

student withdrawal included sex, the "pull" of the labour market and beliefs about the value of a university education. The study was based on three questionnaires. One questionnaire was sent to all 469 individuals who were eligible to return in September 1977 but who did not do so. A second similar questionnaire was sent to all 39 students who returned to fourth year but who withdrew before Christmas, and a similar third questionnaire was sent to a control sample of 395 students who returned to the campus and who were registered at the time of the survey (the 395 were selected at random from the enrolment at Christmas and included both full and part-time students). The return rate of usable questionnaires was 46% for the first group, 54% for the second group and just over 50% for the third group. The dropouts were categorized as follows:

a) Degreed Dropouts: Students who dropped out after accumulating fifteen credits.

b) Nondegreed Dropouts: Students who dropped out prior to obtaining 15 credits.

c) Transfer Dropouts: Students who were eligible to return but who did not, and were in full-time study at another institution.

d) Working Dropouts: Students who were eligible to return and who did not, and were not in full-time study elsewhere. (this status included unemployed students).

The control sample was divided into DEGREED RETURNED STUDENTS and NON-DEGREED RETURNED STUDENTS.

The two minor multivariate studies examined a limited number of variables in relation to student withdrawal. Study R was a study of full-time "upper year" students in the faculties of Arts, Physical Education,

Science and Social Science who had been registered as full-time students in 1976-77 and who were eligible to continue but did not do so. The sudy was based on a questionnaire sent to 732 students of which 318 were returned. In addition to reasons given for not returning and factors affecting the decision not to return, a small number of variables were examined in relation to withdrawal, including year of birth, average, type of program and financial assistance. Study S was conducted at a multi-campus university and was a campus by campus study of the "Did Not Return" rate (DNR), based on students who were eligible to return for the 1977-78 academic year but who did not choose to do so. DNR's were classified as "students who were registered full-time (term load basis) in Arts and Science on November 1, 1976 with less than 15 previous credits and who did not register at the university in 1977-78 or graduate." The study was based on student records with the DNR rate being examined in relation to academic performance, previous credits, and socio-economic background.

Personality Studies

As might be expected, the most complex methodology was adopted by the personality studies. Study T was an attempt to compare "withdrawers" and "persisters" on the basis of the Student Development Task Inventory (SDTI), as well as antecedent variables such as age, sex, marital status, etc. "Withdrawals" were defined as full-time students who withdrew, voluntarily (and formally through the appropriate channels) between September 1, 1976 and February 15, 1977 minus those who indicated that they were transferring to part-time studies, transferring to another institution, academically expelled or dismissed, graduate students, co-op students, and special status students. Of the 93 students eligible

to be included in the analysis, 16 either refused to participate or did not go through the required withdrawal procedure for the university and did not respond to follow-up letters asking for their assistance in the study. "Persisters" were defined as students who were in full-time attendance at the university from February 15 to March 5th, 1977. A random sample of 200 names was drawn from the student directory and a letter requesting that students come to a designated place to participate in a research project which required the completion of a short questionnaire and the SDTI. One hundred and twenty students responded to the request.

Studies U and V were both conducted at the same institution. Study U was an analysis of personality, leadership, and motivational characteristics of student resignees. In August of 1970 three tests were administered to 125 Freshmen:

a) Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Test;

b) The 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (Cottell-Stice);

c) Personal Preference and Biographical Questionnaires.

From November 1970 to August 31, 1971, 50 resignees from all four college years completed a 90-minute structured interview aimed at determining attitudes towards various aspects of life at the institution. Following the interview each was retested on the 16PF, the Jackson PRF (which had previously been administered at the time of selection), and a modified form of the PPBQ.

In August 1971, the same tests that were administered in August of 1970 (minus the Otis-Lennon) were administered to a new intake of 127 freshmen.

On September 11, 1971, 69 second year students were re-administered the following test:

a) the 16 PF

b) Jackson's PRF

c) the PPBQ

Seventeen additional students completed a slightly modified form of the structured interview referred to above. These results were used as control information and contrasted with the results of the resignees.

Study V was an analysis of personality, leadership values and motivational characteristics of stayers and leavers. In effect, it was a continuation of Study O , utilizing essentially the same methodology.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Since this study is, in part, an examination of methodology, all of the studies that were received have been included in the analysis. However, since this project also represents a larger attempt to analyze the problems related to student withdrawal in the present economic and social climate, only those studies completed from 1973-74 to the present will be given consideration in the ensuing analysis of results.

As the preceding section suggests, the diversity of methodology presented in the studies examined thus far seriously inhibits the development of a detailed, and therefore perhaps meaningful, comparative analysis of the results contained therein. Nevertheless, several general conclusions can be extracted from the findings contained in the material, and together they present at least an adequate framework from which the student withdrawal phenomenon may be viewed.

A Growing Problem

As has already been stated, there exists no centralized record as to the number of students who have withdrawn from Canadian universities. This, in and of itself, is a direct reflection of the "state of the art" with which the student withdrawal issue has been approached in the Canadian context, though it might be added that any agency attempting to keep such a record would be faced with a near insurmountable obstacle in attempting

to overcome the complete lack of uniformity with which Canadian universities attempt to categorize and keep track of student withdrawals.

Despite the absence of centralized data there are still a number of factors which would indicate that the rate of student withdrawal is on the increase, although by no means in epidemic proportions. Of the fourteen studies which contained results which could be analyzed, seven considered the question of the rate of student withdrawal with four reporting an increasing rate, three reporting an essentially static rate, and none reporting a decreasing rate. Study M reported an increased rate over the five year period from 1971-72 to 1975-76 of from 4.7% to 5.3%.[1] Study F reported an increase from 1973-74 to 1976-77 of from 4.2% to 5.5%.[2] Study A reported an increase from 1974 to 1977 of from 1.22% to 2.13%.[3] Study Q reported a drop in the retention rate from 1976-77 to 1977-78 in all years. The retention rate dropped sharply from 87.7% to 76.9% in second year, from 75.3% to 70.8% in third year and from 46.1% to 39.3% in fourth year. Study B reported student retention from first through third years as essentially static between 1968-69 and 1976-77 at 79-80%. Study K reported student withdrawal between 1969-70 and 1973-74 as static at approximately 6%. Study G

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[1]The "true" withdrawal rate must actually have been higher since the study kept track of only those withdrawals taking place between October and April.

[2]The "true" withdrawal rate must actually have been higher since the study excluded students who in effect withdrew during the summer (no shows).

[3]The "true" withdrawal rate must actually have been higher since the study kept track of only those withdrawals taking place between October 15 and December 1.

reported the withdrawal rate at 3.2%[1] and reported that this was not "out of line" with previous years.

The increasing rate of student withdrawal as determined by withdrawal studies is not by itself conclusive proof that student withdrawal is on the increase throughout the country. It might be argued that only institutions suffering from increasing withdrawal problems would be prone to conducting withdrawal studies. However, if this point is accepted, then the number of institutions conducting studies provides the most compelling evidence that student withdrawal is on the increase. For while only six institutions had conducted withdrawal studies prior to the 1973-74 academic year, twelve institutions have conducted withdrawal studies since 1973-74 and eleven other institutions are presently engaged in conducting withdrawal studies or are planning to do so in the near future.

Moreover, a great deal of interest in the subject of student withdrawal has been expressed by administrators from institutions which have never conducted withdrawal studies and are not currently engaged in conducting any. For example, 49 out of 51 institutions sampled in this study have responded to a request for information and have indicated interest in receiving the results of this pilot study.

Thus, while the absence of centralized data makes it unwise to state conclusively that student withdrawal in Canadian universities is on the increase, the data presented by

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[1]The "true" withdrawal rate must actually have been higher since the study kept track of only those withdrawals taking place between September and December 1.

localized studies, the increased research in the area of student withdrawal, and the growing attention given to student withdrawal by administrators across the country, when viewed collectively, provide more than anecdotal evidence to support this hypothesis.

When Students Withdraw

While only five studies examined student withdrawal in relation to the academic year of the dropout, all five were unanimous in their finding that student withdrawal is highest in first year. Study M revealed that first year students constituted 56% of the total withdrawal population, as compared to second year students who constituted 24.2% of the withdrawal population, third year students who constituted 14% of the withdrawal population, and fourth year students who constituted 5.6% of the withdrawal population. Study T revealed that first year students constituted 42.9% of the withdrawal population, as compared to second, third and fourth year students who constituted 37.7%, 14.3% and 5.2% of the withdrawal population respectively. Study F examined student withdrawal over a four year period and found first year withdrawal students constituted the highest percentage of the withdrawal population in all four years studied. In 1973-74 first year students constituted 41.4% of the withdrawal population (as compared to second, third, and fourth year students who constituted 25.3%, 24.1% and 9.2% of the withdrawal population respectively), in 1974-75 first year students constituted 53.7% of the withdrawal population (as compared to second, third and fourth year students who constituted 26.9%, 13.9% and 5.6%, respectively), in 1975-76 first year students constituted 50.8% of the withdrawal population, (as compared to second, third and fourth year students who constituted

29.2%, 13.1% and 6.9% respectively), and in 1976-77 first year students constituted 43% of the withdrawal population (as compared to second, third, and fourth year students who constituted 32.5%, 21.1% and 3.3% respectively). Study K revealed that the withdrawal rate was 4% in first year, 3% in second year and less .(no specific figure mentioned) in years three and four. Study P revealed that first year students constituted 44% of the withdrawal population as compared to second, third, fourth, qualifying and fifth year students who constituted 26%, 14%, 8%, 7% and 1% of the withdrawal population respectively.

Further, all three studies which related student withdrawal to time of year, observed that the highest rate of student withdrawal occurred before November 1. Study T found that 41.6% of withdrawals took place by November 1; Study M found that 40% of withdrawals took place by November 1, and Study K found that 25% of withdrawals took place by October 15.

Student Withdrawal by Program

Seven studies considered student withdrawal in relationship to faculty, and it is clear that Arts and Science, particularly Arts, suffers from the highest withdrawal rate of any faculty. In five of the institutions where Arts was separated from Science, Arts had the highest withdrawal rate of any faculty. At one institution where Arts and Science were together in one faculty, that faculty had the highest withdrawal rate, and in another insitution where Arts and Science were together, that faculty had the second highest withdrawal rate.

Study T found that 48% of withdrawals took place in Arts. Study F which examined student withdrawal over a four year period from 1973-74 through 1976-77 found that the percentage of withdrawals from the Faculty of Arts ranged from 39.1% to 51.8% and that in all years Arts had the highest withdrawal rate of any faculty. Study J found that 39.5% of withdrawals took place in the Faculty of Arts, the highest of any faculty. Study P found that 66% of all withdrawals took place in the Faculty of Arts, clearly the highest withdrawal rate of any faculty. In Study K the highest withdrawal rates were found in the Humanities and Social Sciences programs. In Study B the year to year retention rates from first year to second year, from second year to third year, and from third year to fourth year were all found to be the lowest in the Faculty of Arts and Science. Study M was the only study in which a faculty other than the Faculty of Arts, or Arts and Science was found to have the highest withdrawal rate. In Study M Physical Education had the highest withdrawal rate (7.5%), but was followed by Arts and Science with the second highest withdrawal rate.

Why Students Withdraw

Trying to come up with a detailed analysis of why students withdraw was perhaps the most difficult part of this study. Virtually every study which examined this question utilized different terminology and classifications. Some were highly general; others very specific. Some presented reasons which overlapped; others left too many gaps. In the end, it became obvious that it was impossible to answer this question in detailed, quantifiable terms, regardless of how general a comparative taxonomy was utilized.

Thus, the question may only be answered in very general terms. It is evident that a large number of students withdrawing from university are doing so for vocational reasons. The author of Study Q perhaps summed it up best in two statements when he commented "Job market concerns, in terms of an immediate opening (offer) now, or the possible decline of available jobs by the time the student graduates, emerges as the crucial factor in the decision of students to drop out" and "A good job offer, or perhaps a reasonable offer, may be too attractive for many to turn down, especially if they do not believe that a degree will improve their employment prospects."

In Study Q , "job market concerns" was the most frequently cited reason for dropping out by Degreed Working Dropouts (see page 13 for a clarification of this term). "Changed career plans" was the most frequently cited reason by Nondegreed Working Dropouts, and "job market concerns" was the third most frequently cited reason. In Study L , academic program "not relevant to work interests" was the reason most frequently cited for not returning to university. In Study R , "I was discouraged because of uncertain job opportunities after graduation" was cited most frequently as the most important factor affecting the student's decision not to return to university. In Study T "Vocational" reasons were most frequently cited as the primary reason for withdrawal from university. In Study J "the labour market" was cited as the number three reason as to why students were withdrawing from the university.

It is equally evident that many students are withdrawing from university because of dissatisfaction with their academic program, although

it should be noted that one source of their dissatisfaction overlaps with reasons already stated above. In Study M "content of program not useful or relevant" was cited most frequently as the most important factor influencing the decision to withdraw, and "lack of interest in program" was cited third most frequently as the most important factor. In Study F "dissatisfied with academic program" was the second most commonly cited reason for withdrawal. In Study T "academic" reasons were cited second most frequently as reasons for withdrawal, with academic reasons including "program not as expected--expectations not met as outlined by university", "instructional style not acceptable", and "workload too demanding". In Study R , "I considered my post-secondary experience [academic program] did not or probably would not meet my expectations" was cited second most frequently as the most important factor affecting the students' decision not to return to university.

It is also clear that many students are withdrawing because of a lack of interest in university. In Study F "lack of interest" was the most common reason given for withdrawal. In Study J "lack of motivation" was cited as the number one reason for withdrawal. It was not clear, however, whether or not these "motivational" or "interest" reasons were a function of students' problems, university characteristics, or a combination of both factors.

Finally, it is abundantly clear that many students are withdrawing from university for financial reasons. While financial reasons did not appear in any study as the top reason given for student withdrawal, it did appear in many studies as a major factor contributing to student

withdrawal . In Study R "I did not have enough money to continue my education" was cited second most frequently as the most important factor affecting the student's decision not to return to university. In Study P "lack of money" was cited second most frequently as the most important reason for not re-enrolling in the university. In Study Q "short of funds" was given second most frequently as the main reason for dropping out. In Study I "unable to continue because of lack of money" was cited third most frequently as the reason for not returning to the university. In Study G , which as has already been noted was a study of "no shows" rather than a study of withdrawers, "money" was cited second most frequently as the reason for non-attendance at that university.

Other Variables

A number of other variables were explored in relation to student withdrawals, although the limited number of studies exploring such variables, and the conflicting evidence contained therein are such that no conclusive statements may be made regarding the relationship between those variables and student withdrawal. Nevertheless, the findings contained in the studies are presented below so that when the evidence being gathered by withdrawal studies being conducted at the present moment is available, it may be added to the results presently available in order to come up with a more conclusive picture. Some of these variables include the following:

Sex--Four studies examined the relationship between sex and student withdrawal rates. Study M found that a higher proportion of males than females withdrew from the university. While 58.2% of the

total undergraduate population were males, 63.9% of the withdrawal population were males. Study T also found the withdrawal rate to be slightly higher among male students. While 70% of the control group were males, 74% of volunatry withdrawers were found to be males. However, Study P concluded that "the rate of attrition . . . is not different for males and females" and Study Q observed that "retention rates were the same for both sexes in the lower years" but that "women in third year . . . were 50% more likely to take a degree (and not go to fourth year) than men.

Grade Point Average--Four studies examined the relationship between Grade Point Average and student withdrawal. Study S found the DNR rate (see page 13 for a clarification of this term) to be highest among students with "marginal" GPA's at all campuses. At one campus the DNR rate among "marginal" students was found to be 18.67% as compared to 6.20% for "average" (GPA < 2.7, no probation) students and 5.20% for "good" (GPA $\geq$ 2.7) students. At a second campus the DNR rate among "marginal" students was 14.39% as comapred to 7.26% for "average" students and 5.01% for "good" students. At a third campus the DNR rate among "marginal" students was found to be 8.22% as compared to 7.65% for "satisfactory" (clear standing, no probation record). Study T found the entry GPA for voluntary withdrawers to be "almost identical" to that of the control group, but also found the university GPA of withdrawers to be significantly lower than those of the control group. Study P found that the university GPA of students at that institution was consistent with existing research that suggested that "the majority of non-returning students are doing

satisfactory academic work at the time of withdrawal." Study M found that students with grade 12 averages of under 60% and between 60-64.9% were under-represented in the withdrawal population, students with grade 12 averages of 65-69.9% and 70-74.9% were over-represented in the withdrawal population, and students with grade 12 averages of over 75% were under-represented in the withdrawal population.

Socio-Economic Background--Two studies examined the relationship between the students' socio-economic background and student withdrawal. Study P found that students who dropped out came from a lower social class background (as determined from father's education level) than did students who persisted with their post-secondary education. Study S found that the DNR rate was generally highest among students from higher income areas. At one campus the DNR rate among students from high income areas was 7.27% as compared to 6.24% for students from medium income areas and 5.53% for students from lower income areas. At a second campus the DNR rate among students from high income areas was 9.16% as compared to 7.32% for students from medium income areas, and 4.72% for students from lower income areas. At a third campus, the DNR rate among students from medium income areas was 8.26% as compared to 7.76% for students from high income areas and 6.39% for students from low income areas.

CONCLUSIONS

In writing about research conducted on the subject of student withdrawal in the United States, John Summerskill[1] observed in 1962 that after 40 years of research, the information available was neither adequate nor conclusive. Unfortunately 17 years later the same statement may be made about student withdrawal research in Canada.

Perhaps the largest obstacle in the way of this research study reaching an adequate and conclusive understanding of student withdrawal in Canada was the complete lack of uniformity adopted by institutional researchers in their approach to student withdrawal. To a large extent it has been an obstacle that has been difficult to overcome. While some studies examined only full-time students, others examined full and part-time students, and still others gave no indication of exactly what segment of the student population they were examining. While some studies examined withdrawal occurring only in one year, others examined withdrawal over a number of years. While some studies examined "withdrawals" and "non-returners" independently, other studies examined them together, and still others gave no indication of whether they were examining both groups or just "withdrawers". While some studies examined statistics, others examined causality, and still others examined antecedent variables,

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[1] J. Summerskill, "Drop-outs from College" in N. Sanford, The American College, (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1962), p. 627.

personality characteristics, and the like. And the more effort that was put into reducing factors to lowest common denominators, the more it became clear that the analysis was of the "apples and oranges" variety.

It is, of course, understandable that researchers operating independently should utilize such divergent methodologies. What is unfortunate is the quality of methodology utilized, or to be more to the point, the vast number of design weaknesses found in the studies received. Serious faults of design were found in virtually all styles of withdrawal studies examined.

The simplest methodology was adopted by the statistical studies, but simplicity was by no means synonomous with freedom from methodological fault. One study did not account for inter-faculty transfers, thus counting as "dropouts" students who had transferred from one faculty to another, while at the same time counting students who were repeating a year as "returners" thereby distorting the attrition picture. A second study ignored the transfer from full-time studies to part-time studies and thus treated as "dropouts" students who were in fact attending university as part-time students. A third study did not include students who had withdrawn from January through April and therefore failed to include in their withdrawal percentages a significant number of students who in point of fact had withdrawn.

The causal studies were somewhat more ambitious and correspondingly more riddled with methodological difficulties. First, few studies allowed students to choose from a sufficiently detailed list of reasons for withdrawal. One study ignored "dissatisfied with academic program", "medical problems",

"emotional problems", "difficulty in adapting to campus life" and other potentially important reasons on its list given to withdrawing students. Many universities ignored the question of the student's perceived ability to obtain a job with a university degree, although it is becoming clear that this might be an important consideration for withdrawing students.

Secondly, most of the causal studies adopted a somewhat superficial approach in their attempt to assess why students withdraw. For example, most studies included "financial" reasons on their list of factors influencing the decision to withdraw. But none of the studies "probed" for more specific information. How much money did the student have at his/her disposal? How much more would he/she have needed to remain in the system? "Transferred to another post-secondary institution" was a frequently given reason for withdrawal. Yet students do not arbitrarily transfer institutions: they do so for a reason. Did the other institutions have a better or wider range of programs? Did they have better reputations? Did they offer more vocational programs? Did the students transfer there because their friends were there? Such questions were ignored. Moreover, few studies attempted to determine whether students transferring to other institutions were transferring to other universities, or to community colleges.

Thirdly, the majority of the causal studies ignored the possibility of multi-causality. That is to say, students were generally asked to check off the most important single factor influencing their decision to withdraw, rather than being given the opportunity to check off more than

one reason for withdrawing and listing the relative importance of each reason given. Yet it is possible, even probable, that most students who withdraw do so for a combination of reasons, albeit with one reason predominating, rather than for one reason alone.

Fourthly, none of the causal studies examined "reason for withdrawal" in relation to time of withdrawal. It is not illogical to hypothesize that a majority of students who withdraw in September do so for reasons that are different from the reasons of students who withdraw in January.

The multivariate studies were perhaps the most ambitious of the studies, and while they reflected an approach that was much more sophisticated than other approaches, they too suffered from problems of design.

A common fault was the tendency to collect information about variables as they related to withdrawal students without assembling corresponding information about non-withdrawal students to serve as a control sample. While it is interesting to note that 39.7% of withdrawing students had fathers whose highest educational level was elementary school, the statistic is relatively meaningless unless it is known what percentage of "remainers" had fathers whose highest educational level was elementary school.

Another fault common to the multivariate[1] studies was the absence of any attempt to determine the intercorrelations of the variables associated with student withdrawal.

A number of design faults were common to all styles of withdrawal studies. A number of studies completely ignored students who had withdrawn

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[1]Please note the caveat mentioned in the footnote on page 7.

prior to October and November, yet the few studies that did examine student withdrawal according to month demonstrated that the highest rate of withdrawal took place during the pre-November time period. Thus a number of studies attempted to examine student withdrawal while potentially excluding the largest body of withdrawal students. A number of studies also ignored students who completed individual academic sessions but who failed to return to complete enough sessions to obtain a degree.

Moreover, while the various styles of withdrawal studies are subject to criticism on points of methodological design, they also raise a number of other questions.

It must be recognized that statistical studies, even when done to perfection, are of limited utility. At best, a statistical study can only given the institution concerned a clear picture of the magnitude of the student withdrawal phenomenon. Statistical studies do not make any attempt to examine the causes precipitating student withdrawal, and therefore have little use in suggesting changes necessary to ameliorate the student withdrawal problem. That is not to say that statistical studies should not be done, but only to say that they must be recognized as a first rather than a last step in understanding the problems related to student withdrawal.

Causal studies, when done in sufficient detail and when accompanied by a statistical component, are of a somewhat higher value. At best they provide a clear picture of the magnitude of student withdrawal, and give a reasonable picture of causes related to student withdrawal.

Multivariate studies, when done well, are of even more value

than causal studies. They incorporate all of the strengths of causal studies, and where they examine a wide enough range of variables related to student withdrawal, can provide an interesting picture of some of the factors likely to make some students susceptible to the causes underlying student withdrawal.

Personality studies ignore the possibility that institutional and/or systemic weaknesses might be part of the student withdrawal problem and that institutional and systemic changes might be necessary in order to reduce student withdrawal. Personality studies seem to place the blame for student withdrawal solely on student-related problems. They assume that the dropout is "different" and attempt to determine the manner in which he/she "deviates" from the non-dropout.

A Few Recommendations

It is clear that there is still a serious need for research on the subject of student withdrawal from Canadian universities. But if such research is to be useful, it must assess the true magnitude of student withdrawal, it must clearly distinguish between the various categories of student withdrawal, it must attempt to address itself to the basic causes of student withdrawal and to related variables, and it must concern itself with the development of cost-effective solutions to the problems underlying student withdrawal.

As a first step towards realizing an adequate and conclusive understanding of student withdrawal in Canada, it would be useful if institutional researchers adopted a uniform approach towards defining student withdrawals. For example, the following categories might be

appropriate:

a) No-Shows: Students who are accepted for the first time into a degree program but who do not subsequently register at the university.

b) Withdrawers: Students who register and attend some portion of an academic session, but who withdraw prior to the completion of the session.

c) Non-Returners: Students who complete an academic session and are academically qualified to return for a subsequent session[1] but who do not do so.

It is essential that if such statistics are to be accurate every effort should be made to ensure that students transferring from full-time to part-time studies are not regarded as "withdrawing" students. In addition, withdrawal statistics should be maintained such that withdrawals are correlated with academic year, month, faculty, program and degree.

A second step would be for the statistics mentioned above to be forwarded to an appropriate provincial organization for monitoring. Such an organization could thereby distinguish between institutional withdrawals and systemic withdrawals as well as chart the degree of annual fluctuation in the withdrawal rate.

A third step would be for institutional researchers to adopt the research methodologies which are most likely to yield productive results. Properly done, causal and multivariate studies can be useful in identifying the problems underlying student withdrawal, and in suggesting solutions.

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[1]This category refers to a subsequent session in the same degree (that is, first year B.A. to second year B.A.); it is not intended to include B.A. graduates who do not return for an M.A. or M.A. graduates who do not return for a Ph.D.

In concluding, it must be noted that much of the research conducted to date on the subject of student withdrawal from Canadian universities has remained "undercover" in the form of classified information. Such a situation is regrettable, for an important finding generated by the present study was the strong interest among university administrators and institutional researchers in finding out about what other universities had done on this subject. Surely the biggest boost to quality research would be for institutional researchers to make more visible the methodologies used and the findings obtained in studying problems such as student withdrawal.

Finally, there is a paucity of follow-up research designed to evaluate solutions implemented to deal with various dropout-related problems. This is partly due to the fact that many studies simply are not designed to identify institutionally related causes. But there must be dozens of unpublished "case study" attempts at reducing the drop out problem. What types of problems have had attempted solutions? How successful have these solutions been? Do the costs recovered by these solutions justify the costs of implementing them? There is much to be done on these and other important research questions related to the student dropout problem in Canadian universities.